
THIRTY TWO**Perry Mason And Blue Eyes**

The medevac dropped me off at a tented medical complex on the rolling, grassy plains just outside of Quang Tri. After the medics in the field, this was the next line of aide where immediate attention could be given a patient, especially if he was critical, until he could be transferred to a more adequately equipped hospital.

I walked into the closest tent. Two medics were casually going about straightening up, although, after what I was used to, the place looked spotless. One of them stopped what he was doing and came over to me.

“What have we got there?” he asked in a friendly tone, eyeing the bandage on my arm.

“I took a bullet through the elbow.”

“Is there much pain?”

“No. There’s just a burning sensation that’s been getting steadily more uncomfortable and my hand is numb.”

“Okay, sit up here on this table and I’ll be right with you.”

Shortly after the medic left, going into another walled off section of the tent, the second medic went out too, leaving me alone. I was still marveling at the clean conditions in here when a sergeant came in and sat down on a cot opposite the table I was sitting on. He was an older man with heavy grayish streaking in his hair and the neatly pressed fatigues of a career soldier. The fact that his clothes were so

clean told me that he must work at the Army base here. It was obvious he hadn't come in from the field.

There was an awkward period during which neither of us said a word. His dour expression seemed to relay the message that, at the moment, he wasn't in a talkative, chummy mood,...if he *ever* was at all. I figured it must have had something to do with the strange, tiny red spots spaced about every half-inch over his entire face. They completely baffled me. It looked as if he'd been spattered with droplets of red ink from a fountain pen. Finally he spoke.

“What happened to you?”

He sounded less interested in making conversation than in breaking the uncomfortable silence, so I told him about the sniper putting a bullet through my elbow,...to which he nodded indifferently. After another long,...heavy pause, my curiosity got the best of me. I just had to ask.

“What happened to you?”

His waved a hand through the air in disgust, punctuating all the aggravation he was feeling.

“Ahhh,...I made a garbage run down to the dump to get rid of some stuff. Evidently some yo-yo threw a frag out with his garbage and the fire in the dump set it off just when I got there. Now my whole body's peppered with tiny specks of shrapnel.”

I hadn't noticed before, until he mentioned it, but he did have those same red spots all over his hands too. Once again someone's carelessness had done its damage. It didn't take a whole lot of brainpower to realize that a live hand grenade, put in the garbage, would eventually make its way to the fires in the dump. It just wasn't something you *tossed out* with the trash!

Still, much as I hate to admit it, I had to work hard suppressing the mirth I felt welling up inside. It was clear that he wasn't hurt badly, but there were no bounds to the injury he'd suffered to his pride. His grumpy tone more than adequately expressed his annoyance with the whole thing. If anything, I figured the same thought was probably going through his mind as it was through mine. How was a career military man,...the old warrior so to speak,...going to explain to his friends back home that he got his war wounds down at the local dump, tossing out the garbage?

Thankfully, the medic returned before I lost complete control in front of the poor guy. I can guarantee that he wouldn't have appreciated my amusement with his plight. The medic told him that someone would be with him shortly, to which the other man gave no more than an audible grunt. Then he turned to me and tended to my elbow. He removed the bandages Doc Clark had wrapped around the arm and gave it a visual inspection.

“Well, it looks like the bullet went cleanly through,...so you're lucky there. I'll clean it out with peroxide and redress it. Then we'll get you on a flight to Da Nang where they can check for any metal splinters that might still be in there.”

As soon as I was ready to go, my arm supported in a sling, the Huey flew me over to the airport in Quang Tri where I boarded a plane for the short hop, about a hundred-and-fifty miles, down the coast to Da Nang. When we landed there, I was directed to a medical bus, with big red crosses painted on it, that had been waiting to receive wounded from another incoming flight.

I was very much taken aback when I boarded that bus. The front two-thirds had the regular seats down both sides, like any normal bus would, while the rear section was fitted with brackets for stretchers to hang from. What caught me so off guard was that there were only one or two empty seats

on the entire bus and no vacant stretcher slots! These were patients being transferred from some other hospital to the one here in Da Nang. They were all wearing light-blue hospital pajamas and some, especially the stretcher cases, were clearly in bad shape. I think the reason for its having such a heavy impact was that I'd seen an average of two or three of our guys wounded during any particular engagement we might get into, but here was an entire busload of physically maimed young men! The continuous moans coming from back in the stretcher area alone were enough to tear your heart out. This was the real hell of war.

The bus drove to a large medical facility located right on the shore and there was a single mountain, not far away, that towered over the otherwise flat landscape called Red Mountain. The beach in front of the facility was known by the name of China Beach.

Once again, this complex was composed mainly of tents, but there were also several air-conditioned Quonset huts that housed operating rooms and intensive care units.

As soon as I arrived, a medic took the plastic bag I'd been given to carry my personal belongings and lead me to one of the tents. There were four of these tents along one side of a wooden slatted walkway with their open flaps fronting on it. Across the walk was a large canvas canopy set up as a mess hall. Located at the inland end of the walk were the half-cylinder shaped Quonset huts and, at the other end, it stopped abruptly on the white sand of the beach.

I was surprised that there was no one else in the tent I was led into, even though there were ten beds available. The medic helped me get settled in and comfortable.

“Before we do anything, we'd better take a look at that elbow.”

When the bandage came off, I had my first real opportunity to see what the wound looked like. I was somewhat taken aback with my first impression simply because it appeared that there should be a great deal more pain than I was actually feeling. On the inside of my arm, closest to my body, and about two inches above the elbow, where the bullet had exited, was a somewhat circular hole about the size of a silver dollar. It looked like a chunk has been gouged out, leaving a reddish, raw hole. On the under side of the arm, where it had entered, was a similar hole about the size of a dime.

The medic poured peroxide over the larger opening, which fizzed up like the bubbly head on ginger ale when it's poured into a glass.

"I imagine that smarts some," he said, noticing my wince.

"Yeah,...some!"

"As soon as we get it bandaged up it should feel better."

"Have you been here long?" I asked as he worked.

"No,...actually, I've only been here at the unit for about two weeks. Medics are required to spend six months at a rear unit, like this one, and six months out in the field with a company,...although not necessarily in that order. I finished my six months in the field two weeks ago and here I am."

He completed the wrapping of the arm using metal fasteners to keep it tight. Then he gave me two shots, one in the arm and one in the buttocks.

"There,...that ought to hold you for awhile. The next thing you have to do is get out of those fatigues and into these pajamas."

I picked up the typical blue hospital pajamas with my good hand and smiled, "A clean change into *anything* should feel good with the condition these fatigues are in."

“Oh, you noticed that too, huh?” he said with clear humor.

We both laughed as I realize that, with his just having finished six months in the field, he knew exactly how grungy a set of fatigues could get when they were worn for a month or more at a time.

“You’re scheduled for surgery in about an hour, so I’ll come back just before then and give you another shot.”

I changed into the pajamas and decided to lie down for awhile. Though it had taken a wound to get it, I couldn’t believe how good it felt just to lie on anything resembling a real bed. I’d almost forgotten what that was like.

About fifteen minutes before I was due for the operating room the medic returned.

“How are you feeling now?”

“Not too bad. It feels good to relax.”

He raised a hypodermic needle and squeezed out the air.

“With this shot you’ll be amazed at just how good you can really feel. It’s morphine.”

After giving me the shot, he said he’d be back in about five minutes to see how I was doing. When he returned, I was lying down again.

“How you feelin’ now there, partner?” he asked.

“I haven’t noticed any real change. Actually, I don’t feel any different at all.”

The medic smiled knowingly, “That’s because you’ve been lying down. Try standing.”

I was pretty confident until I got to my feet.

“I’m telling you that shot didn’t doooooo-----”

Fortunately he knew exactly what to expect. When I began to get up, he'd moved to the side of the bed and now caught me just before I fell.

“You were saying?” he asked with obvious amusement.

No sooner had I gotten upright than everything in the room, and especially my body, seemed to be made of rubber.

My words came out in a slurred, drunken manner and I can just imagine the big, dumb grin I must have had on my face.

“You were right about that stuff. I haven't felt this good in a lo-o-o-o-n-g time.”

He eased me onto a rolling gurney and wheeled it down to the Quonset hut at the end of the wooden walk.

There are only two things I remember clearly about being in the operating room. Sometimes, when a person is as heavily drugged as I was, they'll say the first thing that comes into their mind, no matter what it is. This can often lead to some pretty funny moments for the personnel working in there. I remember thinking, but didn't realize I'd said it out loud until the medic told me later, that the surgeon who was preparing to operate on my elbow looked exactly like Perry Mason,...and that I didn't mind being operated on by Perry Mason.

I also remember that there was a nurse standing over me with the white cap and surgical mask that are standard in an operating room. The thing that struck me about her, since it was the only thing I could see with the mask on, were her eyes. They were crystal clear, and the prettiest light blue I'd ever seen. I remember thinking that they were absolutely beautiful. Again, it was the medic who told me later that, just before I went under completely, I told the nurse she was beautiful even with that mask on.

Evidently, the way I said it was enough to break everybody up. I'd been a big hit in the operating room!

The next thing I remembered was waking up in a bed in one of the recovery areas. It took a few moments to clear my head and that's when I realized that my left arm, which was resting across my midsection, felt like it weighed a hundred pounds. It had a really thick wrapping around it, much heavier than any of the medics had put on previously.

With the affect of the drugs wearing off, but still present, I felt that the only thing I could move, and even that with difficulty, was my head, which I turned to look around.

I could see that I was at one end of a Quonset hut with about fourteen beds facing out from both long walls. I was surprised that, though I hadn't seen anyone in any of the tents before my operation, every bed in this building had a patient in it!

At the far end was a aide station where three medics were tending to the patient's needs. One of them, a young black guy, noticed I was awake and came down to my bed.

"Well now, how are we feeling this morning?" he asked.

I rested my head weakly back down on the pillow, "This morning?...You mean it's morning?!"

"It sure is. It's a beautiful, bright, sunny day outside. You slept right through the night, just like a baby."

I couldn't believe that that much time had gone by. It seemed like I'd only gone into the operating room a few moments ago.

“I’ll tell you what,” the medic said as he checked the chart at the foot of my bed, “There’s nothing like a shave to make a guy feel good first thing in the morning. If you feel up to it, I’ll raise your head a little and shave you. Then, if you’re hungry, I’ll get you some breakfast from the mess tent.”

At this point I didn’t mind anything. I let him take complete charge of the situation. This was the first time anyone, other than myself, had ever shaved me, and he made it a thoroughly enjoyable experience. His bedside manner and conversation were extremely uplifting.

I spent two full days in the intensive care recovery building and saw things that revealed, not only just how horrible war really is, but how amazing the human body is at standing up to the severest punishment.

The first thing to hit me was the fact that here was an intensive care unit where the average age of the patients was nineteen! Under what other conditions would one see a group of young men, who should be the healthiest they’d probably be in their entire lives, suffering such horrible disabilities?

In the bed to my immediate right was a kid who spent most of his time heavily sedated, but occasionally he’d come out of it and beg the medics for water. Evidently they had orders that he was to be given nothing orally, which they tried to explain to him in the gentlest way they could.

I couldn’t quite figure out what his problem was until later that afternoon when a doctor came in to check on him. The doctor helped him turn on his side, so that his back was facing me. Then he removed a large bandage that covered most of the kid’s back. I was utterly stunned by what I saw.

All the way across the small of his back there was a section missing, as if it had been sliced neatly out by a cylinder about eight inches in diameter. It looked to me like I could see his kidneys and other internal organs exposed to view, and that was quite possible with so much of his back missing! It also

seemed incredible that anyone could live with such a horrible opening in his body, yet, even though he was heavily drugged, he appeared to be holding his own!

On the second day I was there, they removed him for a flight to Japan. From there he'd be flown to a hospital back in the States.

No sooner was that bed vacant, however, than they brought in another man and put him into it. This one was entirely different. He appeared to be in his late twenties and the medics worked over him with a sense of extreme urgency. First, they stripped him down to his boxer shorts. Then they rolled in a large tub filled with water and blocks of ice. Moving as fast as they could, they soaked towels in the frigid water and spread them all over the poor guy's body.

As if that wasn't bad enough, as soon as they had him entirely covered, with the exception of his face, they placed the blocks of ice, right on the bed, along both sides of his body. Finally they wheeled over two large floor fans and turned them directly on him at full force!

I watched in fascination, since they obviously knew what they were doing, as the guy's teeth literally began to chatter. The whole scene looked like some kind of torture out of the Middle Ages!

It wasn't until later that I'd find out the man had malaria and a life threatening fever. The extreme cold was an emergency measure to bring his temperature down before it killed him.